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FCJ-162 Symbolic violence in the online field: Calls for 'civility' in online discussion.

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Abstract:

In this paper, I argue that enforcing norms of civility in a deliberative space can be dangerous, as a requirement of civility can be used as a tool to stifle dissent and reinforce existing arrangements of power. I analyse the comments that led to the closing of the online comments board of a community newspaper in Greeley, Colorado in the United States, the editor of the paper's justification for shutting down commenting, as well as the few comments that made it to the forum in response to the announcement before the commenting function ceased. I find that despite the fact that comments were often rude and insulting, they were performing a vital deliberative democratic function.

Introduction

In light of early high hopes for the democratic potential of online discussion, the reality of attacks, hostility, vitriol, and at times racist and sexist sentiments can be alarming (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, and King, 2005; Hlavach and Frievoegel, 2011;

Richardson and Stanyer, 2011; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, 2012). According to some, if these spaces are to be valuable, the participants should have to maintain some level of mutual respect. Concerns over vitriol in anonymous online comments have led some newspapers that maintain online forums to alter their commenting systems. Some have abandoned anonymity, some require comments be tied to Facebook identities, and in some cases, newspapers have closed their comments sections entirely (Mart, 2010; Bangert, 2011; Crider, 2011; Kennedy, 2012). The rationale for freedom of expression is that healthy democracy requires that its citizens be able to freely speak their minds. Online newspaper forums are imagined to be sites of free expression and of various forms of public deliberation that are considered to be vital to democracy. But an insistence on ‘civility’ in a deliberative space can be dangerous, as the requirement of civility (which is often equated with ‘politeness’) can be used as a tool to stifle dissent and reinforce existing arrangements of power.

In this paper, I analyse the comments that contributed to the closing of the online comments board of a community newspaper in Greeley, Colorado, in the United States, along with the justification made by the editor of the newspaper for shutting down commenting, and the few comments that made it to the forum in response to the announcement before the commenting function ceased. I argue that despite the fact that comments were often rude and insulting, they were performing a vital deliberative democratic function. The justification for the forum’s closure provided by the newspaper’s editor expresses regret that commenting does not reflect a polite ideal of political discussion, and argues that the state of the forum was not serving the interests of the newspaper’s readers or the newspaper itself. Many of the newspaper’s readers disagreed, and saw the shuttering of the forum as a blow to free public expression, and suggested that the move was motivated by financial concerns on the part of the newspaper company.

I then discuss these findings in the light of the potentially problematic nature of private or corporate ownership of spaces of public discussion. I conclude that corporations have an interest in associating themselves with polite discourse, but that mutual respect and real social change can be antithetical. The closure of a newspaper’s online forum could be interpreted as an expression of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) on the part of the newspaper company, stifling voices that do not serve its interests and consolidating cultural capital in the hands of elite dominant groups. The exercise of symbolic violence in order to silence impolite speech is used to further a cultural policy, encouraging tame expression and discouraging comments that some find uncomfortable or insulting. Accusations of ‘incivility’ and ‘trolling’ are used as a tool to silence viewpoints or groups that are deemed unproductive. In public debate, one person’s attack may be another’s burning objective, and discomfort may be necessary for its successful delivery.

Political talk and deliberative democracy

Some justifications for providing spaces for free public debate are rooted in theories of deliberative democracy. Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler (2009) write that deliberation, 'in its most basic form, entails talking with other citizens about political questions in an honest and open-minded way' (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 4). Deliberative democracy theory considers informal deliberation to be central to the ideals of democracy, which Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (2001) state as 'facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, ensuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth' (Fung and Wright, 2001: 5). In deliberative democracy theory, democracy cannot be reduced to its formal aggregative processes, such as voting. 'In contrast [to voting-centric or aggregative theories of democracy], deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting' (Chambers, 2003: 308).

Mutual respect is often thought of as a requirement of deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge, 2012). Seyla Benhabib (2002) states universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity should be guiding, normative principles of deliberative democracy, but Benhabib proposes a democratic deliberative model that also allows for contestation between different opinions and viewpoints, indicating that respect and disagreement can coexist. To capture the point that discourse can be both democratically valuable and lack adherence to any etiquette or politeness, Zizi Papacharissi (2004) conceptualised politeness as something separate from civility in online discussion. Papacharissi's concept of 'incivility' included threats to democracy, the assigning of stereotypes, and threats to the rights of others, while 'impoliteness' included name-calling and vulgarity, acts that hinder conversation's ability to run smoothly and have typically been associated with civil discourse. Reconceptualising civility for its democratic contribution rather than its adherence to politeness allowed Papacharissi to count contestation and critical argument among discussion participants as democratically valuable even if it was impolite. Similarly, in an analysis of argumentation in online political discussion, Marcin Lewinski (2010) found most online discussion to be filled with fallacious argumentation, irrelevant, unqualified, unoriginal arguments, straw person arguments, and abusive language, but he concluded that the kind of argumentation that arises in online forums (which he termed 'collective criticism') can lead to better testing of arguments and positions, and ultimately more sophisticated opinion formation among participants.

Online forums offer a space in which cultural contestation can take place. Internet forums are located within what Benhabib (2002: 21) describes as the unofficial public sphere, and are important to the formation of will and opinion. Online political forums have been overwhelmingly thought of as sites of democratic deliberation (Freelon, 2010). Informal deliberation may not be likely to result in deciding upon solutions to all social problems, whether it is conducted in living rooms, on sidewalks or in online discussion forums. However, according to Jane Mansbridge (2012), informal talk does not have to be directed at coming up with a consequential, binding decision to be important in a deliberative system, even if that talk is merely expressive and does not appear to be deliberative. Mansbridge describes how it is through everyday talk that some ideas are legitimated and advanced over others, and a well-functioning deliberative system will pick up on the best ideas while discarding the worst ones. One of the most important functions of everyday discussion in a deliberative system, according to Mansbridge, is to collectively decide what should and should not be considered part of the realm of the political. Mansbridge defines 'political' as 'that which the public ought to discuss' (Mansbridge, 2012: 89). She argues that social norms will adequately decide what is appropriate for public discussion and what is not. In a deliberative system, it is through informal public discussion that it is justified whether any issue is deemed to be something that should be talked about in public.

Corporate spaces as sites for free expression

When online commenting spaces are owned and run by private corporations, a vibrant public debate may not be the primary purpose of the forum, even if that is its stated goal. Corporations have financial interests and shareholders that they are ultimately accountable to, and we need not assume they have free public expression at heart when they host online forums alongside their content. Commenting drives page hits, and advertisers are fond of those.

Historically, free expression does not tend to fare well in corporate-owned spaces. Herbert I. Schiller (1989) described how corporate values and perspectives have a way of crowding out other voices and viewpoints. When do corporate-owned commenting spaces become 'inhospitable places for restless intellectuals and social nonconformists,' as have private shopping malls? (Schiller, 1989: 100) When a corporation owns a space, it ultimately decides what does and does not happen within it. The private shopping mall 'effectively insulates [shoppers] from seeing, hearing, or encountering expression and ideas that might, however slightly, disturb the mood, routines, and tranquility of daily shopping' (Schiller, 1989: 101). The open political debate that had been possible in public city spaces was no longer welcome in the private shopping mall.

Newspapers are not shopping malls, and they perform a vital social role in the dissemination of news, providing the public with the information that fuels informal debates in a deliberative democracy. If that is the case, what better place to have those debates than directly below the newspaper articles themselves? Robert McChesney (1999) noted the potentially intoxicating effect of the marriage of the utopian rhetoric surrounding internet technology and the rhetoric surrounding the mythology of the free market. But, he predicted, no matter how high our hopes for its democratic potential, the internet would develop along the same profit-focused paths as have other corporate media. Internet companies do not have contributions to a thriving democracy as their primary goal any more than does The Walt Disney Company.

Despite the appearance of democratic participation in corporate-owned interactive online spaces, users' attention and voices are easily shaped and dominated by corporate interests and discourses (Dahlberg, 2005). Jodi Dean (2009) wrote that communication technologies act to obscure the capitalist nature of the system in which they operate. According to Dean, we are in a condition of communicative capitalism in which the rhetoric surrounding communication technologies is merged with the rhetoric of the market, so the celebration of inclusion, participation, and contribution leaves us incapable of meaningful examination of the injustices of global capitalism. In communicative capitalism, the goal of the communication technology company is to filter all communication through its network, so every utterance becomes a node in the network, adding to the profit and control of the company, and making resistance to it difficult or impossible (Mejias, 2012). The more we communicate with corporate-owned communication technology, the less power each utterance has.

A good amount of research has been done on the fate of free expression in corporate-controlled space. Farooq Kperogi (2011) researched user-generated content on corporate-owned websites and found that contributions from citizens do not necessarily create a more democratic public conversation; in corporate-sponsored spaces, even user-generated media are being coopted by corporations, limiting their democratic potential. Danielle LaFrance and Lisa Nathan (2012) found that commercially owned social networks provide increased organising potential for activist groups, but at a cost: activists' messages risk being compromised by the very corporate tools that can allow such groups to grow and publicise. Thomas Corrigan and Jennifer Proffitt (2011) explored the trend of the purchase of campus newspapers by large media companies and concluded that when university newspapers are purchased by for-profit companies, freedom of expression is compromised by the profit motives of the corporation.

On the other hand, corporate internet spaces can be used to further democratic goals in ways for which they were not designed. For example, Marcin Lewinski and Dima Mohammed (2012) analysed status updates made to Facebook during the Egyptian phase of the Arab Spring. They found that though Facebook is often thought of as a trivial entertainment or diversion, and a colonised commercial space rather than a site of public sphere activity, during the Arab Spring it became a site of deliberation and mobilisation. The use of Facebook during the Arab Spring demonstrates that deliberative practices can arise from structures that were not intended to be deliberative.

Forum closures as symbolic violence

The United States claims to have no cultural policy (Miller and Yudice, 2002: Chapter 1). In the absence of a state cultural policy, the U.S. allows culture to be directed by either the public or corporations. As the ones with more resources, corporations will likely be the ones to fill in the gap. Justin Lewis and Toby Miller (2002) described two typical approaches to cultural policy: the facilitate-the-market approach, in which it is believed that the free market will best decide the direction culture should take, and the dirigiste approach, in which the state sees itself as the protector of certain forms of high culture from transitory public tastes.

If an online comments forum is closed, then we have lost a cultural space in which Benhabib's (2002) cultural contestation can take place. Public conversation is cultural, and culture is political (McGuigan, 2003). When a newspaper closes its online forum due to the disrespectful comments it contains, the newspaper company is acting out both forms of cultural policy. Because it is a private business, its public actions are manifestations of market forces. At the same time, the company is acting, at least in name, as the protector of public taste. The Portland Press Herald shut down its comments board in October 2010, and the editor stated that the decision was made to 'protect the public, our readers, and the subjects of our stories' from 'hurtful and vulgar' comments (Kiesow, 2010), betraying a belief that it is the duty of the newspaper to maintain a certain kind of expression, and the preferred cultural expression does not include 'vulgar' remarks. But who decides what is 'vulgar' and hence should be excluded from the public conversation? And what is the justification for excluding such expression? Conversation that is pleasant to read is not necessarily the most productive to deliberative democracy. 'Social harmony is bought at the expense of those whose tastes are not only aesthetically unacceptable but, more importantly, potentially contestatory' (Miller and Yudice, 2002: 11).

It is hard to argue against civility. 'Civility' is what Karen Tracy (2010) described as a platitude, or an 'insipid, banal' insistence on an 'abstract, noncontentious value claim' that most people would agree with (Tracy, 2010: 122). A requirement of civility in discourse is less likely to be examined and interrogated precisely because it is a abstract platitude and sounds like something that should be reached for. But things that do not invite examination are sometimes those that should be scrutinised. An insistence on something vague like 'civility' in discourse can be used to achieve suspect ends, especially when trumpeted by elites. As Darrin Hicks (2002) describes,

Dialogue, civility, teamwork, and collaboration are the current buzzwords of industry. These processes have been co-opted by powerful governing agents to describe their working procedures for managing disagreement and resolving problems, procedures designed to reproduce institutional power and to manage radical challenges to that power. (Hicks, 2002: 251)

Hicks argues that it is difficult for those within a deliberative space to challenge those in power when playing by their rules and working within their processes.

The management of online forums on the basis of civility (at least, a more traditional definition of the concept similar to 'politeness'), can be seen as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) by the owners of the websites. Symbolic violence is exercised when those in a dominant position (in this case, the owners of the news organisation that operates the affected online forums) exercise power over those who hold less cultural capital (in this case, the site's users) in order to organise cultural capital in ways that benefit those in power. The closure of a forum is a direct, less symbolic form of control, but symbolic violence is also exercised in indirect ways, such as through demands that comments be written in a particular rhetorical style. If the online social field is typically characterised by an elevated tone and emotional language, any efforts to discourage hostile speech could be seen as an exercise of symbolic violence, including the flagging and deleting of 'unacceptable' comments, as well as the complaints of users of the online forums, who have internalised norms of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Thus the users exercise control over each other, unwittingly distributing cultural capital in ways that favour those in a dominant position. One form user management takes is accusations of 'trolling.'

‘Trolling’ accusations as a form of control

Scholars have defined trolling as a participant in online discussion’s purposeful attempt to provoke others and derail otherwise productive or on-topic conversation. According to Claire Hardaker (2010), ‘A troller is a CMC [computer-mediated communication] user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement’ (Hardaker, 2010: 237). Hardaker states that what constitutes trolling is relative, and based on the norms of the community. Appropriate behaviour in one online space may be considered trolling in another. John Kelly, Danyel Fisher and Marc Smith (2009) argue that what seems to make a troll a troll is inauthenticity, and they call those who sincerely voice marginalised or extreme opinions ‘fringe authors,’ while the ‘troll’ is inflammatory solely for the sake of disruption. On an online discussion forum, however, the behaviour of a fringe author and a troll may look the same. It is impossible to tell the motivation of a user by reading his or her post.

Trolling can be very effective in derailing conversation and can negatively harm users’ feelings of trust and community. Herring et al (2012) analysed the actions of a troll on a feminist online forum. They found that the troll succeeded in provoking members and disrupting conversation. At the same time, because the term ‘troll’ has such a negative association and history, the act of labeling someone a ‘troll’ can be used to silence a commenter who shares an unpopular or unwelcome opinion (Bergstrom, 2011). On an online forum, a commenter who shares an unpopular opinion, or who posts with an elevated tone or language can be labeled a troll and find his or her comments discounted or excluded from the discussion.

The contested role of mutual respect in deliberative discourse

Despite the claims of some deliberative theorists (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge, 2012) that deliberation must be characterised by mutual respect, some expression that appears to be disrespectful may be justified in a deliberative process or space. The demand that all public discussion be marked by respect may be not only unrealistic, but damaging to democratic deliberation. Indeed, there seems to be a tension within some of the theory and literature on deliberative democracy between on one hand, a belief that people cannot deliberate properly without some level of respect, and on the other hand, the recognition that apparently disrespectful expression may be necessary

to get one's voice heard. For example, Mansbridge (2012) argues that mutual respect and consistency in speech should characterise deliberation, but at the same time, she acknowledges that people sometimes need to take extreme or offensive positions in order to achieve authentic deliberation. Tracy argues that, 'It is important to recognise that almost any passionate, angry comment will be seen by its target as a rude and disrespectful attack' (2010: 203). Where is the line, then, between purely unproductive trolling and seemingly hostile expression that advances an excluded point of view?

Tracy argues that rather than a blanket insistence on 'civility' in deliberative discourse, we should make room for what she calls reasonable hostility.

Reasonable hostility, as I define it, is an expression of anger that most people would judge reasonable. It is emotionally marked, critical commentary about another's action that matches the perceived wrong to which it responds. As people are connected to their ideas, and emotion and arguments are expressed together, the idea of reasonable hostility captures how people actually talk. (Tracy, 2010: 203).

Similarly, Lynn Sanders (1997) argues that the requirement of mutual respect in deliberative dialogue is unrealistic, and can be damaging. Many of the guiding values of deliberation are actually conservative, not democratic, she argues, and in supposedly mutually respectful deliberation, compromise is achieved through dominance, inequality, and exclusion.

Chantal Mouffe (1999) argues that communication free of power or authority of some kind is impossible, and that conflicting interests can be productive in public deliberation if brought into the light. Those involved in deliberation, Mouffe writes, should acknowledge the inevitable power issues present, and that the interests of the groups or viewpoints involved cannot necessarily be aligned. 'Hence, the importance of distinguishing between two types of political relations: one of antagonism between enemies, and one of agonism between adversaries. We could say that the aim of democratic politics is to transform an 'antagonism' into an 'agonism'' (Mouffe, 1999: 755, emphasis in original). That agonism, according to Mouffe, can and should be channeled toward democratic ends. Shiv Ganesh and Heather Zoller (2012) argue that an agonistic approach to dialogue, one that sees conflict as inevitable and necessary, is best suited to the creation of social change.

Indeed, social change needs what Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud (2009) call an ‘uncivil tongue,’ as calls for ‘civility’ have often been used as a tool to silence unwelcome voices and keep the oppressed in their places. Voices that are positioned outside the dominant structure are sometimes labeled ‘uncivil’ even if their goals are democratic (Sullivan, Spicer and Böhm, 2011).

Returning to online newspaper forums, it seems that newspaper companies tend to hold disdain for disrespect in commenting, viewing it as inappropriate and unproductive, while the commenters themselves hold a different view of such discourse. Bill Reader (2012) found that journalists who work for the news organisations attached to online discussion forums envision that such spaces should be an ideal of polite, rational debate, but they feel that respectful, meaningful public discourse has been overrun by vile, anonymous trolls. The commenters themselves, Reader found, had a different interpretation. He found that participants in forums often felt that anonymity and lack of censorship were essential to maintaining a vibrant space for free expression, and that the disrespect and rancorous tone of much of the discussion was far from an actionable problem, and in fact could be necessary at times to express viewpoints that were missing from public discourse.

Considering that accusations of incivility in commenting have been used to denounce and censor online forums, I explored what was taking place on an online discussion board before the forum closed due to claims of incivility. Was it disrespectful? Was debate over public issues taking place? How did the editor frame the shut-down, and how did commenters react to the closure?

Method

The *Greeley Tribune* is a small, community newspaper in northern Colorado in the United States. Owned by Swift Communications, Inc., it reports mainly on local topics, but also covers national and international issues. Its comments forum was anonymous (with registration required) and user-moderated, in which registered users could rate comments with a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, as well as flag them for review and possible removal by newspaper staff. The commenting system was discontinued on 30 April 2011, shortly after the *Tribune*’s editor, Randy Bangert, published an announcement that commenting would cease due to the incivility of the posts it contained (Bangert, 2011). In order to examine the content of the forum that may have led to its shut-down, the last week of comments were analysed using textual analysis.

Analysis was informed by Papacharissi's (2004) distinction between impoliteness and incivility. Though often conflated, and 'incivility' is often used to mean 'impoliteness,' this analysis considered the two to be separate. Comments were coded as disrespectful or impolite if they were patronising, condescending, hostile, or rude; made an attack or threat; or contained insults, vitriol, or profanity. Such impoliteness could have been directed at another user on the comments board or at any person or group. Respect or politeness, on the other hand, was characterised by courtesy, respect for others, or consideration.

Comments were also coded for their political substance. Substance was defined by its potential contribution to social discourse. A comment was considered 'substantive' if the author was making some kind of political (in a broad sense, not limited to electoral politics), social, or cultural point. The quality of the argument was not a factor when determining substance. Whether a comment was on-topic was not a consideration, nor was ideological orientation, style, or factual accuracy.

Textual analysis was also used to analyse the *Tribune's* announcement of the shut-down in order to uncover its stated motivation, as well as the reaction of some participants in the forum, as 19 comments reacting to the announcement were posted before the system was shut down. The framing of the closure by the *Tribune* was compared to its framing by the forum's users to determine if the characterisations of the move were similar or different.

The last week of comments

The two biggest debates in the last week of commenting on the *Tribune's* forum (from 24 April to 30 April 2011) discussed the issues of whether religion should be used as the basis for laws and the authenticity of U.S. President Obama's birth certificate. The comments often demonstrated overt disrespect, both toward other commenters and toward public figures and groups, but the commenters were furthering what Benhabib (2002) and Mansbridge (2012) cited as one of the purposes of public discussion: to decide what does and does not belong in the public debate.

One of the biggest debates during the last week of commenting at the *Tribune* was in response to an article titled, 'Crime of adultery may be repealed in Colorado,' published on 26 April 2011. This debate eventually devolved into vicious attacks on the religious by the non-religious and vice versa, but first, many commenters expressed the view that religion

should have no place in law-making. For example, one commenter replied, 'Just another law with it's [sic] roots in the Bible that has absolutely no business being administered by our Government.' Another user commented, 'I'm glad they are trying to repeal such idiotic statutes. These are religion based crimes and have no place in the laws of the State or the federal government.' The discussion became more and more heated, as insults began to appear in the comments: 'Even the mightiest evangelical hypocrite has to ask themselves if either of these two laws would ever hold up to the scrutiny of our Supreme Court. As right leaning as it is, that answer would still be no.' The tone became more and more elevated as the discussion continued and multiple exclamation marks and all capital letters were used to emphasise points:

you can't legislate morality....period! this includes, substance abuse, same sex marriage, prostitution, gambling, and many others. so the if we only had a brain the DEA, ATF, and Vice Squads all over the country would be a fraction of the current spend and we could turn most of these moral indiscretions into tax revenue. Because after all folks in America there is only one real GOD - MONEY...

Commenters eventually moved on from debating the appropriate place of religion in law and began calling each other 'sinners' and 'scripture-slingers,' but before the conversation devolved into mere attacks, it consisted of a substantive discussion of the social function and rationale for laws.

The other *Tribune* article that sparked a great deal of debate in the last week of commenting was an article published on 27 April titled, 'White House releases Obama birth certificate.' Despite the frequent attacks on other commenters, U.S. President Obama, and Donald Trump, among others, the debate over the authenticity of Obama's birth certificate amounted to much more than a he-said-she-said string of insults.

Though some commenters discounted this new evidence of Obama's U.S. citizenship ('Obama was adopted by an Indonesian man and had to have Indonesian citizenship himself to attend his Muslim school in Indonesia. Could Obama, in Indonesia, have dual citizenship? Somebody has to sort this out. '), most of the commenters responded to this article with an expression of relief that the distracting debate over Obama's citizenship was over, including some attacks directed at those who ever believed Obama's birth certificate was fake, as well as attacks on television personality Donald Trump, who was quoted in the article, and who was partly responsible for keeping suspicion of the authenticity of Obama's citizenship alive, for example: 'Trump needs to shut his pie hole. I would never vote for this arrogant jerk!!'

Some of the comments amounted to attacks on other commenters without any substantive discussion of the issue. For example, 'Libhole....your leftist BS Facts HAVE NO CREDIBILITY WITH ME! How many times do i got to tell you...ya bone head.' This comment attacks a previous commenter with whom he or she disagrees, calling him or her a 'bone head' who offers 'leftist BS facts.' In addition to insults, this comment contains the use of all capital letters in order to provide emphasis and the appearance of yelling. In another comment, a commenter attacks two previous commenters with insults and imagery: 'Criminy, roadkingclassic - your posts should come with creepy organ music, apt accompaniment to the insane self-applauding cackling you like to include in your meaningless rants.....' Attacks and elevated language are characteristic of much of the discussion on the forum, and do not provide the appearance of rational, calm discussion.

This discussion, however, similar to the religion debate, provides substantive political debate in addition to an inflammatory tone and attacks. Some accused those questioning the authenticity of Obama's birth certificate of racism:

Why can't the witch hunters just come out of the closet and admit they can't stand the fact that a black man named Obama is the president. To them it's like finding out their Daughter is dating a Mexican!! Racism is interesting if you look at where is comes from. It's a learned self protection mechanism - If we reject anything different via a warped perception of hate and fear, then we will be protected from outside harm. It's no different than your parents trying to convince you that you would get hairy palms or go blind if you masturbate! It's boogy man BS and it's sad so many Americans still have this mental illness.

This commenter is arguing that not only does the birth certificate issue have no place in public discussion, but that its origins are in 'hate and fear.' The fact that this is even an issue, this commenter claims, is because of underlying racism among the U.S. public. Others expressed similar sentiments:

I'm a conservative registered republican relaxed 'grey matter' - so what's your point again? that the presidents policies have something to do with his birth certificate? you say you don't like his policy which is fine, it's a democratic country, but we all know it's about a black man named Obama being president that drives you people crazy. I don't agree with many of his policies, but I respect him as a human being and especially as our president! the birther nuts should be ashamed - and the Donald???? I would vote for Donald Duck before that bigot.

This commenter combines accusations of racism against those who advance the ‘birther’ controversy with attacks on Donald Trump, as well as the use of multiple punctuation marks, which adds to the elevated tone of the post.

Other commenters express suspicion that the birther controversy served as a distraction from more important political issues, as in the following comment: ‘Tou [sic] are right, SP. Obama was better off not releasing it. It kept small minds off of the important stuff.’ Others questioned the timing of Obama’s release of his long-form birth certificate, accusing Obama of using the birther controversy as a distraction from other, more important political issues:

So why release it now? To distract from Syria’s appointment to the UN Council on Civil Rights? Maybe to gloss over Bernanke’s presser later today? Maybe to take people’s minds off the rapidly rising costs of food and gas? Or perhaps the most likely, to make The Donald look stupid (not that he needs much help)? If it was the latter, I’m afraid Obama only encouraged Trump to make further demands.

This comment ties what many believed to be a frivolous matter to larger political issues, arguing that the controversy served to purposely distract the U.S. public from other, more substantive concerns. Other comments discussed above linked the birth certificate controversy to possible discomfort with a black President, pointing to wider issues of racism in the U.S. Hence, though discussion of a seemingly frivolous debate about Obama’s citizenship, commenters were making substantive points about politics and racism. Many commenters were expressing a feeling that this issue had no place in public discussion, while others took the argument further and suspected that the fact that it was occupying so much attention pointed to deeper problems with the U.S. public.

The paper’s justification for the closure

In his announcement of the closing of the comments section, *Tribune* editor Randy Bangert decried the ‘ugliness and vile name-calling’ the anonymous forum contained (Bangert, 2011). He stated that the purpose of providing an online forum for reader comments was to foster engagement in the news, ‘but is it really the kind of engagement we want?’ Bangert laments the poor quality of web discussion, comparing it to the content of the *Tribune*’s news content: ‘We have standards in print - one of which is civility, and another of which

is identification of the person making the comment.' It is hard to argue against civility (by which Bangert seems to mean 'politeness'), as it is hard to argue in favour of 'ugliness and vile name-calling,' but as the above analysis of the *Tribune's* online comments noted, there was much more substance contained in the forum than name-calling and attacks. Hence, when Bangert states that, 'There's been a debate in the newspaper industry for quite some time about whether it makes sense to allow anonymous reader comments on our websites,' it leads to the question, makes sense to whom? To the public? Or to the newspaper?

In his announcement, Bangert predicts that some users will not react well to the closure of the commenting system:

Before our web readers form a 12-step support group and plot how to fire-bomb the editor's office, let me emphasize it's only a test. For at least a few weeks, we're going to monitor the reaction from our web readers, as well as the impact on our web traffic.

Bangert predicts how the users will handle this 'test' (comments on the *Tribune* have since been reactivated, but they are not public, and limited to those with subscriptions to the newspaper). He suspects commenters will react with both anger and grief at the loss of the ability to comment. The *Tribune* knew their forum was important to at least some users.

How the commenters reacted to the shut-down

Indeed, we see Bangert's prediction of users' reactions reflected in the 19 comments that were posted in response to the announcement and before comments were shut down. Some commenters decried the shut-down as censorship ('America was a great thing back in the days of free speech. So long good friends. '), while others suggested that people needed to be less sensitive ('I really LOVED what everybody had to post- ah c'mon, are most people really THAT thin skinned besides the Tribune PC police? I think this 'censorship' will bite you in the butt!'). Many commenters said they would miss their discussions ('So long, gang, it's been fun...').

One commenter expressed the opinion that not only was this decision a misguided one on the part of the *Tribune*, but also suggested that the strategy was motivated by financial concerns:

Web based advertising revenue is driven by unique visitors and page views. I can think of a few struggling print newspapers who would probably be envious to have the number web hits the online Tribune generates in just one day, and yes the comment section is probably driving a lot of this traffic.

Since most print newspapers will eventually be forced online anyway, regardless of how many get thrown in our driveways to drive up circulation numbers, driving away online readers certainly won't help readership in the long run

The Denver Post, who's [sic] online readership seems quite healthy, allows comments and from what I can see is pretty much self censored.

Eliminating online commentary supposedly so readers won't be subjected to the same vitriol found in literally every corner of internet media seems convenient for those who only prefer to cling to the dead and dying print media. Probably not a good thing if you're a newspaper trying to survive anyway it can.

It's been fun, see 'ya...

This commenter displays a rather sophisticated understanding of the economics and current state of the news industry. He or she questions whether the *Tribune's* stated concern over impoliteness makes sense not only for its contribution to public discourse, but for the finances and ultimate longevity of the newspaper. After all, this vitriol objected to by the *Tribune's* editors and management is 'found in literally every corner of internet media.' Depriving the public of a discussion space they find valuable, this commenter predicts, will only hurt the *Tribune* in the long run.

The very last comment to make it through before the shut-down is, fittingly, an insult:

'You're a complete coward, Randy Bangert, and your newspaper is crap.'

Discussion

During the last week of commenting on the *Tribune's* comments board before it was shut down, two heated debates ignited; one over whether religious morality has a place in lawmaking, and the other over the authenticity of President Obama's birth certificate and citizenship. Both debates involved many comments that were impolite and used elevated, hostile language and personal attacks on other commenters and on people and groups outside of the board, but both discussions also contained a great deal of substantive, political discussion and debate. One deliberative function that was being acted out in both of these debates was what Benhabib (2002) and Mansbridge (2012) have described as one essential to informal public deliberation, namely the debate over what should and should not count as 'public,' and so which issues belong in public debate. In the debate over religion, forum participants debated whether religion should be a rationale for deciding what is and is not criminal behaviour, or if religious morality should be considered a personal and private matter. In the argument over Obama's birth certificate, not only were commenters debating whether the issue should be one taken up by the public, but they were also pointing to political and social reasons as potential explanations for why it was an issue of public concern in the first place.

Does the rancorous tone of these debates discount them as unproductive? When looking at insults on others and inflammatory language, many of these comments might count as trolling, if trolling is defined by posts that are inflammatory. But the attacks serve other functions, notably, as a vehicle through which to make substantive political points. Focusing on the tone and character of attacks used in the discussions risks losing sight of the deliberative role such debates perform. The commenters were contesting political and cultural issues, exchanging opinions and information in order to figure out what should be considered public issues. As Kelly, Fisher and Smith (2009) argue, trolling and substantive arguments appear the same if looking at their inflammatory tone.

But to Swift Communications, Inc., owner of the *Tribune*, what was happening in their online space was unacceptable. Whether motivated by the desire to distance itself and its reputation from such rancorous debate or by a desire to avoid offending its advertisers, or both, it shuttered the forum, depriving the public of one outlet for deliberation. I have characterised this move on the part of the *Tribune* as an expression of symbolic violence, an attempt to organise cultural capital along lines that benefit those in power. It may be unrealistic to expect corporate-owned websites to be spaces for free public expression, as their ultimate interests lie in profit and not in a healthy, deliberative democracy. During the U.S. culture wars, 'market forces' were used as a tool of censorship, arguing that market forces should be allowed to regulate art (McGuigan, 2003). We may be seeing a similar

trend in the corporate enforcement of ‘civility’ in online spaces, one in which both market forces and calls for civility are being used to justify both censoring and removing sites of public debate. ‘The right of citizens to express outrage and seek change if they feel wrongs are being committed is central to any understanding of democracy’ (Tracy, 2010: 201). And yet, one site of such outrage, online discussion forums, are being vilified for the outrage they contain.

Unproductive trolling does exist, of course, but drawing boundaries between trolling and reasonable hostility can be problematic. After all, who gets to decide what is and is not productive to debate? Are these distinctions that we feel comfortable making? Are these distinctions that we want someone else to make, especially when they may have financial motives at heart?

One thing to note is that the findings of this study indicate that participants on the *Tribune’s* comments board discussed the announced forum closure in terms of its possible financial motives on the part of the corporation that owned the newspaper. In Dean’s (2009) discussion of communicative capitalism, the rhetoric of the market and the rhetoric of participation are wedded. Dean wrote that in our condition of communicative capitalism, the inclusion, participation, and contribution enabled by communication technologies is highlighted in a way that obscures the capitalist nature of the system. This study did not find evidence of the latter half of that phenomenon. Forum participants emphasised their right to participate and contribute in public debate, but stated that the profit motive of Swift Communications was hindering that right rather than aiding it.

Conclusion

When it comes to the democratic potential of the internet, glittering, utopian hopes have not worn off. Internet technology does have potential to connect people in ways never before possible and allow them to deliberate in new ways and in new spaces. But possibilities are not realities, and a nuanced approach to online communication may be necessary, one that takes the type of space into account when we imagine what is possible within it. Maybe it is not realistic to expect the commenting spaces associated with corporate media companies to be venues for free public expression, and perhaps we should direct those hopes toward spaces that are less likely to be compromised by outside interests.

Biographical note

Shannon Sindorf is a doctoral candidate in the Journalism and Mass Communication program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research interests involve popular culture, popular understandings of technology, news coverage of technology, and the ways in which new technologies intersect with politics and political participation.

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